

Published in:

*Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 44, 2012

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BRIDGING EAST AND WEST – OR, A BRIDGE TOO FAR?

PAULO FREIRE AND THE *TAO TE CHING*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers key differences and similarities between Freirean and Taoist ideals. I limit my focus to the *Tao Te Ching* (attributed to Lao Tzu), paying brief attention to the origins of this classic work of Chinese philosophy before concentrating on several themes of relevance to Freire's work. An essay by James Fraser (1997), who makes three references to the *Tao Te Ching* in his discussion of love and history in Freire's pedagogy, provides a helpful starting point for investigation. A summary of Fraser's account is followed by a more detailed discussion of the meaning of 'action' and 'non-action', the nature and role of knowing and knowledge, and the relationship between ignorance, happiness and education for Freire and Lao Tzu. I conclude that while the differences between these two systems of thought are significant and must be acknowledged, reflection upon these differences has the potential to be educationally productive.

## KEYWORDS:

East; West; Freire; Taoism; *Tao Te Ching*;

action; knowledge; ethics

## **BRIDGING EAST AND WEST – OR, A BRIDGE TOO FAR?**

### **PAULO FREIRE AND THE *TAO TE CHING***

Just over a decade ago I received a review copy of *Mentoring the Mentor* (Freire *et al.*, 1997), a collection of critical essays on the work of Paulo Freire. Among other items of interest, I discovered a chapter by James Fraser (1997) on the themes of love and history in Freire's thought. One aspect of this chapter in particular caught my eye. In addressing a number of ideas in Freire's approach to liberating education, Fraser cited passages from the *Tao Te Ching*. The comparison intrigued me and I made a mental note to one day return to it. I had at that time read the *Tao Te Ching* only once, and my initial reaction in seeing the link Fraser made between Lao Tzu and Freire was one of mild skepticism. The two bodies of work – Taoist philosophy and Freirean pedagogy – seemed somewhat remote from each other, separated not merely by geography and the passage of time but by fundamental differences in ontological, ethical and political orientation.

With the passing of years and several rereadings of the *Tao Te Ching*, in a number of translations, I now believe the gulf between Freirean and Taoist thought is not as great as I had originally supposed. The comparative analysis undertaken in this paper will show that there are some significant differences between Freire and Lao Tzu on matters of epistemology, politics and education, but these are, potentially at least, *productive* tensions worthy of careful reflection. There are, moreover, some surprising similarities that can be identified, and these too warrant continuing exploration. A comparison of Freirean and Taoist worldviews has important broader implications for the project of bridging 'East' and 'West' and raises a number of questions for further inquiry in this area.<sup>1</sup>

The *Tao Te Ching* is one of the classic works of ancient Eastern philosophy and is the best known of the Taoist texts. It has been translated into English numerous times, and there has been much debate over the merits of different versions. Different spellings of the key terms in Taoist philosophy are also used. ‘Tao’ is sometimes written in English as ‘Dao’, and in such cases the book becomes the *Dao De Jing*. The book is also sometimes known as the *Lao Tzu*. Fraser’s point of reference in discussing Freire and Taoist ideas is Stephen Mitchell’s version of the text (Mitchell, 1991). For the passages quoted by Fraser, I shall use the Mitchell text; elsewhere, preference will sometimes be given to the translations by Ellen Chen (Chen, 1989) and D.C. Lau (Lao Tzu, 1963). In adopting any English version, one must always be mindful that no translation can quite do justice to the original text.

The paper is structured in three parts. The first section provides an overview of the origins, structure and content of the *Tao Te Ching*. The second part summarizes Fraser’s application of ideas from the *Tao Te Ching* to Freirean theory. This is followed, in the final section, by a more detailed discussion of several key themes in Freirean and Taoist thought: the relationship between action and non-action, the nature and role of knowing and knowledge, and the relationship between ignorance, happiness and education.

### **Reading the *Tao Te Ching***

The *Tao Te Ching* (pronounced ‘Dow Deh Jing’: Mitchell, 1991, p. vii) is attributed to Lao Tzu, an older contemporary of Confucius (551-479 BC) (Lau, 1963, p. viii). Lao Tzu is reported to have met with Confucius and, at the latter’s request, given him concise advice on the art of living. The earliest general history of China, the *Shih chi*

(*Record of the Historian*), was composed by Ssu-ma Ch'ien at the beginning of the first century BC (p. viii). In that work, it is noted:

Lao Tzu cultivated the way and virtue, and his teachings aimed at self-effacement. He lived in Chou for a long time, but seeing its decline he departed; when he reached the Pass, the Keeper there was pleased and said to him, "As you are about to leave the world behind, could you write a book for my sake?" As a result, Lao Tzu wrote a work in two books, setting out the meaning of the way and virtue in some five thousand characters, and then departed. None knew where he went to in the end. (cited in Lau, 1963, pp. viii-ix)

It has been claimed by some that as a result of the 'way' he created, Lao Tzu lived to 160 or even 200 years of age (Lau, 1963, p. ix). There is, however, considerable uncertainty over Lao Tzu's biography and the authorship of the *Tao Te Ching*. Indeed, according to Lau, Lao Tzu was probably not an historical figure at all. The *Tao Te Ching* is one of several Chinese works from the second half of the fourth and first half of the third century BC with titles meaning 'elder' or 'old man of mature wisdom'. 'Lao Tzu' can be interpreted as 'old man', and the *Tao Te Ching* falls into a genre of Chinese literature consisting of sayings embodying the kind of wisdom associated with old age. Lau elaborates:

There is no reason to suppose that the titles imply that these works were written by individuals. They are best looked upon as anthologies which were compiled from short passages by an editor or a series of editors. Most of these

short passages reflect the doctrines of the time but some represent sayings of considerable antiquity. [...] It is probably because ‘Lao Tzu’ happened to be the name of one of the hermits in the Confucian stories and also figured as the title of one of these anthologies of wise sayings that the *Lao tzu* alone has survived and is attributed to a man who instructed Confucius in the rites. (pp. xi-xii)

Regardless of the accuracy of legends associated with Lao Tzu as an historical figure, it is clear that the period during which the *Tao Te Ching* was produced was a ‘golden age of Chinese thought’ (p. xii). A number of different schools of thought emerged, including those of Mo Tzu and Yang Chu, both founded by Confucius, as well as Taoism. ‘Taoism’ comes from *tao chia*: the school of the way (p. xiv). While the *Tao Te Ching* is the best known work in Taoism, texts such as the *Chuang-tzu* and *Lieh-tzu* are also important and differ somewhat from the *Tao Te Ching* on a number of points of ethics and political philosophy (see Wong, 1997). Other works in the Taoist canon include the *T'ai Shang Ch'ing-ching Ching* (‘Cultivating Stillness’) (Wong, 1992), the *Tao-hsüan p'ien* (‘The Mysteries of the Tao’), the *Wu-hsüan p'ien* (‘Understanding the Mysteries’) and the *T'ai-hsüan pao-tien* (‘The Sacred Treatise on the Great Mystery’) (Wong, 2004).

The *Tao Te Ching* comprises 81 short ‘chapters’, ranging in length from a few lines to several paragraphs. The chapters are verse-like expressions of ideas, often in the form of opposites. Taoists live happily with apparent contradictions, letting them exist ‘without replying or favoring one solution over the other’ (Slater, 2004, p. 152). Opposites in Taoism are complementary rather than irreconcilable; they work together to form a unity (Glanz, 1997, p. 196). The classic representation of this idea is the

yin/yang symbol, now so well known in the Western world. The content of the *Tao Te Ching* is both abstract and concrete. The discussion of the unnamable Tao in chapter 1 may seem mysterious and evocative, but the *Tao Te Ching* is also, as some read it, a manual on the art of living (Mitchell, 1991, p. vii): its purpose is practical rather than theoretical, and the Tao can be seen as ‘an inward guide of good and bad, precious and vile, noble and vulgar’ (Slater, 2004, p. 150).

The themes traversed in the *Tao Te Ching* are wide-ranging. The text addresses questions of metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics. The central concept of Taoism, ‘the way’, is notoriously difficult to define. In fact, a key idea in Taoism, and in the *Tao Te Ching* specifically, is that the way cannot be defined. We can at best come to an approximation in our understanding of the concept, as the opening words of the *Tao Te Ching* make clear:

The way that can be spoken of  
 Is not the constant way;  
 The name that can be named  
 Is not the constant name.

(Lao Tzu, 1963, ch. 1)

In Mitchell’s version of the text, these words become: ‘The tao that can be told / is not the eternal Tao / The name that can be named / is not the eternal Name (Mitchell, 1991, ch. 1). Chen’s translation is slightly different again: ‘Tao that can be spoken of, / is not the Everlasting (*ch’ang*) Tao. / Name that can be named, / Is not the Everlasting (*ch’ang*) name (Chen, 1989, ch. 1).

Ram-Prasad (1985) argues that the question ‘What is *dao*?’ rests on a mistake. The question ‘presupposes that there is a reality that has to be sought out, whose structure, now hidden from us, has to be revealed’ (p. 46). The Taoist sees this in a different way: ‘there is a world that we live in, and how we behave is different from how nature is, to our detriment. The question then is “How is the *dao* to be followed?”’ (p. 46). Lao Tzu allows some understanding of the Tao to develop by inviting readers to consider what it is *not*. Comparisons with God, the Absolute, brahman, and the like are, in Ram-Prasad’s view, inadequate. Tao is not a metaphysical entity, or a single specific ‘way’. The sum of all particular ways is not itself a tao or way. The key question about a tao or way is ‘what it does (that is, how it is followed)’ (p. 49). Ram-Prasad continues:

The totality is there, but it is nameless, because what can be named is only a *dao*/way that can be followed – and we have seen that the sum of *dao*/ways is not what is or can be followed. The only constant is the fact that ... there are *dao*/ways to be followed. (p. 49)

Glanz (1997) provides further helpful comments:

The Tao, according to ancient Chinese texts, is the unifying, unseen, yet ever present force that governs the universe. With no beginning or end, the Tao in its essence represents the universal undifferentiated state beyond the laws of duality that control our physical existence. The Tao embodies a perfect harmonious state of the universe before and after creation – balanced and centred. According to Taoist thought, the Tao, independent of human



existence, represents the structural idea that unifies creation. In other words, the Tao is the fundamental harmony or oneness that pervades the universe. (p. 195)

Other key elements of the *Tao Te Ching* include the concepts of no-action, self-transformation, tranquility, and self-equilibrium (Chen, 1989, p. 18). Taoism emphasizes submissiveness and yielding (Lai, 2008). It shows that there is strength in weakness and that by not forcing things, much can often be achieved. Taoism seeks to promote peacefulness among people, harmony with nature, and respect for all things. The *Tao Te Ching* warns against activities that encourage people to desire more than they currently have; this, it is suggested, will lead to unhappiness and disharmony. If we seek happiness and good health, we should, from a Taoist point of view, avoid 'attachment to material things, and activities that excite the mind, rouse the emotions, tire the body, and stimulate the senses' (Wong, 1997, p. 25). The Taoist sage, as a leader, aims not to increase knowledge and learning among those governed but to maintain a certain innocence and ignorance. The sage does not seek power, or fame or success. He or she does what needs to be done and then quietly withdraws. The sage does not preach morals or compliance with convention but demonstrates by example and lives in accordance with eternal Tao. These ideas and other central tenets of Taoism will be discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

### **Fraser on Freire and Lao Tzu**

Fraser argues that in earlier times and in other traditions Freire would have been seen as 'not only a great teacher but also a spiritual guide' (Fraser, 1987, p. 175). There is,

Fraser claims, a strong sense of 'love, humility, and rootedness in life' (p. 175) in Freire's work. Fraser wishes to enter into a conversation with Freire on matters of faith and spirituality, love and history, but he does not want to impose a religious framework on Freire's writings that Freire himself would not accept. He cautions against the dangers of sentimentality, and of treating Freire as a kind of saint, in undertaking this task. Fraser maintains that at the heart of Freire's revolutionary pedagogy lies the concept of love and, with this, a profound respect for the divine in every human being. A liberating approach to education with the principle of love at its center demands democratic, purposeful dialogue. Fraser sees in Freirean theory a rejection of the intellectual vanguardism found in some Eastern European and communist regimes. He also draws attention to another common problem in interpreting and applying Freire's ideas: 'the focus on liberating method at the expense of liberating content' (p. 186). Teachers, Fraser reminds us, cannot be neutral as far as pedagogical content is concerned. To focus on dialogue as a mere method, ignoring the need for social action and change, is to miss the point of Freirean pedagogy. Teachers have a potentially significant role to play in bringing about the kind of social change Freire has in mind (including a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources), but the positions they occupy are by no means unproblematic. Teachers can join with others in a struggle against oppression, in its multitude of different forms, but in doing so they can sometimes carry with them what Freire referred to in earlier work as the 'oppressor within' (cf. Freire, 1972a). Fraser reinforces Freire's point that educational efforts are always located in a particular moment in history, in the lived 'flesh and blood' struggles of human beings. Freirean pedagogy is, in many respects, the antithesis of escapist spirituality. Freire encourages

teachers and students to learn from the past and to consider possible futures, but his pedagogy is also rooted in the present and the concrete.

Fraser makes three references to the *Tao Te Ching* in his chapter. The first is in relation to the point that liberation cannot be imposed from above. Each person, Fraser suggests, ‘must be the maker of her or his own liberation’ (p. 177). Fraser quotes the following lines from the *Tao Te Ching*:

Can you love people and lead them

without imposing your will?

Can you deal with the most vital matters

by letting events take their course?

Can you step back from your own mind and thus understand all things?

Giving birth and nourishing,

having without possessing,

acting with no expectations,

leading and not trying to control:

this is the supreme virtue.

(Mitchell, 1991, ch. 10)

These words, Fraser claims, capture ‘a very Freirian approach to life, and to education’ (Fraser, 1997, p. 178).

Fraser goes on to stress the importance of seeing those with whom educators work as whole people. In elaborating on this point, he refers to a portion of chapter 17 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

If you don't trust the people,  
you make them untrustworthy.

The Master doesn't talk, he acts.  
When his work is done,  
the people say, "Amazing:  
we did it, all by ourselves!"

(Mitchell, 1991, ch. 17)

Fraser argues that the last part of this chapter ('Amazing: we did it, all by ourselves') is consistent with the Freirean idea of teachers and students, or political leaders and the people, engaging in a common struggle, thereby becoming one. The common victory, 'achieved by all for the benefit of all' (Fraser, 1997, p. 192), becomes something to celebrate. Fraser refers to Freire's shift from the language of 'I' ('I am', 'I know', 'I free myself', and so on) to the language of 'we' ('we are', 'we know', 'we save ourselves'), and suggests that once this point has been reached, 'distinctions and roles, teachers and learners, have disappeared in a mutual quest for liberation' (p. 192).

Fraser's final reference to the *Tao Te Ching* is in relation to his point about hope, opportunity and action being located in the present – in the immediate historical

moment. This, Fraser says, is part of what makes Freire's work both utopian and practical. Here, Lao Tzu's notion that '[t]he Master gives himself up to whatever the moment brings' (Mitchell, 1991, ch. 50) is quoted. In linking this point to Freire's work, Fraser continues:

It is this very base in affirming agency in the midst of concrete conditions where human beings live that Freire finds the condition for hopefulness. Because he has such deep trust in the people, Freire sees hope and possibility in the midst of oppressive situations that would lead others only to despair. His hope is not based on an easy optimism but on a deeply held confidence in the link of the concrete and the possible. (Fraser, 1997, p. 195)

### **Bridging East and West – Or, A Bridge Too Far?**

Fraser's essay makes an important contribution to Freirean scholarship. This would be the case without the references to Taoist thought, but this dimension of the essay gives added significance to some of the claims Fraser makes about Freire's philosophy, pedagogy and politics. Fraser is not the first to apply Taoist ideas to education (see, for example, Glanz, 1997; MacKinnon, 1996; San, 2006; Slater, 2004; Zigler, 2007). Nor is Taoism the only Eastern philosophical tradition to have been explored in Education journals in the West. Others have used the terminology of Taoism in discussing Freire's work (Ramdas, 1997) and have compared Confucian and Freirean pedagogical principles (Ng, 2000; Shim, 2007). Several authors have considered the educational implications of Buddhist ideas (e.g., Vokey, 1999; Johnson, 2002; Jagodzinski, 2002). Fraser's chapter is helpful, however, in

stimulating further reflection on Freire and Taoism. This section makes a start in this direction with a discussion of differences and similarities between Freire and Lao Tzu on several key epistemological, ethical and educational themes.

### *Action and Non-Action*

The passages quoted by Fraser warrant closer examination. In each case, Fraser has quoted only part of the relevant chapter from the *Tao Te Ching*, and in some instances the missing words, together with some of the words included in the passages quoted, prompt some questions about the similarities between Freirean and Taoist ideas. For example, the *Tao Te Ching* refers to ‘letting events take their course’ when dealing with most vital matters, and to ‘acting with no expectations’ (Mitchell, 1991, ch. 10). Fraser refers to chapter 50 but does not quote these words: ‘[The Master] doesn’t think about his actions; they flow from the core of his being’. Elsewhere in the *Tao Te Ching*, the question is posed: ‘Do you want to improve the world?’. The answer given is: ‘I don’t think it can be done / The world is sacred. / It cannot be improved’ (ch. 29). Chapter 29 concludes by noting that the Master ‘sees things as they are, / without trying to control them. / She lets them go their own way, / and resides at the center of the circle’. This idea of centering oneself in the Tao and letting ‘all things take their course’ finds expression earlier in the text (ch. 19). From near the beginning of the *Tao Te Ching* we are advised: ‘Practice not-doing, / and everything will fall into place’ (ch. 3).

These passages and others in the *Tao Te Ching* lend weight to the view that Taoism promotes a certain passivity in human affairs. On the face of it, this is in tension with the Freirean commitment to reflective, transformative action (Freire,

1972a). Freire does not advocate ‘not-doing’, at least not as the default response to social problems. He does not simply let events take their course, and he does not accept that the world cannot be improved (Freire, 2004, 2007; Horton & Freire, 1990). He *does* want teachers and students to think about their actions, and he might argue that in many situations it would be impossible to act without expectations. His espousal of ideals such as critical thought, hope and political commitment (Freire, 1994, 1997a, 1998a) seems to be very much at odds with a Taoist orientation to human affairs.

Yet, care needs to be taken here in the way words from the *Tao Te Ching* are interpreted. Sometimes ‘not-doing’ constitutes a form of action. In an educational dialogue, for example, a teacher must (as Freire would have it) learn the art of patient listening – of sometimes not speaking, in order to allow contrary positions to be expressed, reflected upon and discussed by others (Freire, 1998b; Freire & Shor, 1987). The Master, according to the *Tao Te Ching*, ‘acts without doing anything / and teaches without saying anything’. *Silence* (which may or may not emerge when a teacher practices the art of listening) can play an important pedagogical role, opening up a space for contemplation that would otherwise be compromised by the clutter of too much talk. We can, of course, teach without saying anything in a variety of other ways – through our gestures and movements, the decisions we make, the priorities we set, the commitments we demonstrate, the relationships we build, and so on.

Mitchell (1991) argues that the *Tao Te Ching* does not support a position of passivity. Instead, it offers a paradigm for non-action where this is the ‘purest and most effective form of action’ (p. viii). Mitchell compares the Taoist notion of ‘doing nothing’ to the state reached by a good athlete, where ‘the right stroke or the right movement happens by itself, effortlessly, without any interference of the conscious

will' (p. viii). Nothing is done under such circumstances because the 'doer has wholeheartedly vanished into the deed' (p. viii). This is not altogether dissimilar to the process Freire describes in explaining the act of study. Freire speaks of a form of knowing where the scholar becomes immersed in the act of seeking to understand the object of study as deeply as possible (Freire, 1985, 1996, 2007). It might be said here that the knower and the known become one. The knower remains an active, reflective Subject, and in this sense retains a kind of distance from the known. But the very act of distancing – of 'stepping back' in order to know – becomes also a means for coming closer to (and integrating more fully with) the object of study (Freire, 1998b; Freire & Shor, 1987). Freire himself would often become utterly absorbed in his studies, reading or writing with such intense concentration that he would lose track of time and awareness of his immediate surroundings. This utter absorption can be seen as *both* 'action' and 'non-action'. It is precisely the 'non-action' part of this particular form of action that gives it its distinctive character.

### *Knowledge and Knowing*

Even if we acknowledge this connection, there are still important differences. For the *Tao Te Ching* warns against the very idea of pursuing knowledge. Freire tends to place greater epistemological value on the process of knowing than the accumulation of knowledge, and in this sense he is not completely at odds with Lao Tzu. The last chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* (ch. 81) states: 'One who knows (*chih*) does not accumulate knowledge, / [o]ne who accumulates knowledge (*po*) does not know' (Chen, 1989, p. 231). Lau (1963) translates this passage as 'One who knows has no wide learning; he who has wide learning does not know' (p. 88). It might be



suggested that this is, in large part, a problem of balancing breadth and depth in understanding (cf. Roberts, 1996a). By emphasizing ‘wide learning’, as Lau puts it, we inhibit depth in understanding – including our understanding of ourselves. This, however, would be an inadequate response, for at the heart of the *Tao Te Ching* is a more fundamental distinction between different approaches to knowledge.

In chapter 65 of the *Tao Te Ching* the following words are found: ‘Those in the past who were good at practicing Tao, / Did not want to enlighten (*ming*) the people, / But to keep them in ignorance (*yü*)’ (Chen, 1989, p. 204). The text continues: ‘People are hard to rule, / Because they know (*chih*) too much. / Therefore, to rule a nation by knowledge, / Is to be the nation’s thief. / Not to rule a nation by knowledge, / Is to be the nation’s blessing.’ (pp. 204-205). These ideas rest on a distinction between two different modes of knowing: the verbal (spoken) and the non-verbal (unspoken). According to Chen, the former ‘describes consciousness coming out from nature without return while the latter belongs to a reversive consciousness in dynamic union with the unconscious’ (p. 206). The sage needs to understand this distinction and keep the people away from the knowledge that departs from nature. Chen observes:

Knowledge or consciousness as a movement away from nature leads to externalization, discord, and, finally, death. The sage ruler, by keeping his people in ignorance, preserves the peace and harmony of nature in society.

This approach to knowledge and politics raises important questions not just for Freireans but for all educationists. For if Lao Tzu is taken seriously here, it is not clear what remains of the project of education *per se* – that is, of *any* process of deliberate,

purposeful teaching and learning. Freire would not support a position of keeping people in ignorance. He would accept that it is not possible to know all things (Freire, 1976), and that difficult decisions must often be made by teachers and learners in prioritizing different forms of knowledge. But a political philosophy based on the deliberate cultivation of ignorance would have been repugnant to him (cf. Freire, 1972a, 1972b, 1998b, 2004). Freire recognized the practical limits to the pursuit of knowledge (time is one of those limits, as discussed in Roberts, 1996a), but he did not want to close off areas of prospective inquiry to learners or set up pedagogical conditions conducive to the maximization of ignorance (Escobar *et al.*, 1994). Nor did he want to impede the process of reflection – and this seems to be ruled out, or at least discouraged, by the *Tao Te Ching*.

It might be argued that what is being advocated in the *Tao Te Ching* is not the dissolution of all learning but merely the return to a particular type of learning that can sometimes be lost. What we need, a Taoist might say, is to relearn the process of connecting with nature. There is an ambiguity in the *Tao Te Ching* over the meaning of ‘nature’. It seems reasonably clear that what is being referred to in the text is something more than, or perhaps other than, ‘the natural environment’. Exactly what that is, however, remains uncertain. Perhaps it is that which is ‘natural’ to us as human beings. We might want to employ a term such as ‘human nature’ to try and capture this. There is at best only an implied and vaguely expressed view of ‘human nature’ in Lao Tzu’s text, but even if it were possible to pin this down in more precise detail, it is not obvious that the knowledge advocated in the *Tao Te Ching* should be regarded as a return to this. A better way to understand this, I think, is to see the *Tao Te Ching* as advocating alignment of all we do with the natural harmony of the universe – with the way things ‘naturally’ are, always have been and always will be.

While Taoism stresses non-verbal knowing over verbal knowing, this does not mean there should be an emphasis on ‘doing’ over ‘merely talking’ or verbalism, as Freire called it in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972a). For, as we have already seen, the *Tao Te Ching* promotes an ideal of *not-doing*. If we accept Mitchell’s argument that Taoist not-doing is analogous to the total immersion in an activity characteristic of elite athletes, there is still a form of reflective knowledge required here that, *prima facie*, seems to be ruled out by Lao Tzu’s text. The complete integration of oneself with an activity does not emerge from ‘no where’; it is *learned*. Indeed, it is often the case that the more one devotes oneself to the deliberate practicing of one’s sport or art, year after year, reflecting on and learning from mistakes, the more likely one is to be able to reach the state Mitchell describes: that is, one where ‘the right stroke or the right movement happens by itself, effortlessly, without any interference of the conscious will’ (Mitchell, 1991, p. viii). Coaches, mentors and teachers play crucial roles in the development of such abilities, and their work, at least in part, involves talking and direct instruction – the promotion of conscious, verbal knowing. Verbal knowing is thus not necessarily at odds with non-verbal knowing. The latter may depend on the former and the former always involves an element of the latter.

‘Non-verbal’ knowing, as Chen describes it, bridges the conscious and the unconscious whereas ‘verbal’ knowing does not. Yet, this seems to set up a false dichotomy, not only between two different forms of knowing but between two different modes of being. Chen’s account recognizes that the knowing Subject can come to understand or experience the unconscious, and this, for Chen, means to be in accord with ‘nature’. Conscious activity of a certain kind, then, can allow us to know the unconscious. But Taoism, as interpreted by Chen, does not allow for the

identification of a conscious element in the unconscious. The unconscious is simply ‘there’: it is not in any way constructed; it does not change or evolve over time. From a Freirean perspective, this can be seen as a peculiarly anti-dialectical approach to the relationship between conscious knowing and unconscious knowing. While Freire does not have a well developed theory of the unconscious, his references in early writings (e.g., Freire, 1972a) to ‘the oppressor within’ give some indication of the general direction of his thought in this domain. Oppression, in its myriad forms, cannot be explained merely in terms of social structures or practices; rather, it becomes ‘embedded’ in the minds of those who are oppressed, giving unconscious shape to worldviews and decisions that reinforce the very oppression being experienced (cf. Gorder, 2007). Importantly, for Freire, the unconscious is not *fixed* but is rather subject to the influence of reflective, active, knowing human beings.<sup>2</sup>

### *Ignorance, Happiness and Education*

The *Tao Te Ching* suggests that people will be happier if they are kept in a state of ignorance. Surprisingly, Freire might not argue against this. He would agree that rulers who wish to maintain stability and govern with relative ease may, at least for the short term, benefit from an unreflective population of political Subjects. Freire might have some reservations about using the term ‘Subject’ with a capital ‘S’ if people are, in effect, encouraged to become more like *objects* (cf. Freire, 1972a, 1976). He might concede that those denied knowledge can feel they are happy (‘Eliminate ... learning so as to have no worries’, says the *Tao Te Ching*: ch. 20, Chen, 1989, p. 102) and that developing a critical consciousness is a sure road to a certain kind of discomfort and even suffering. None of this, however, justifies a

political strategy of maintaining and promoting ignorance. This for Freire, would go to the heart of our thinking about the purposes of education. Education, from a Freirean point of view, is *meant* to make people uncomfortable (cf. Freire & Macedo, 1995; Freire, 1997b). An educated life is a life filled with questions and uncertainties (Freire, 1997a, 1998a; Freire & Faundez, 1989). It is, in some senses, a restless life; one in which we can never declare the end has been reached and nothing more needs to be done. For some, these characteristics are conducive to happiness; for others, unhappiness.

If it is true that from a Freirean perspective, one can never permanently ‘sit still’, this does not mean that moments of stillness are ruled out by Freire’s epistemological and ethical orientation. To the contrary: Freirean reflection positively demands this. If we think of a ‘moment’ in this context not as the passing of a few seconds of time but as any identifiable period characterized by particular forms of thought, feeling or action, reflection in the Freirean sense needs both stillness and restlessness. We need passion and commitment, for example, but these qualities must, from a Freirean point of view, be coupled with humility, care and respect for others (Freire, 1972a, 1995; 1998a, 1998b). Freirean reflection, grounded in an ethic of love (Darder, 2002; McLaren, 2000), is active but not aggressive. While some commentators have stressed the differences between Freirean pedagogy and meditative practice in education (e.g., Robinson, 2004), there is, to my way of thinking, no need to see it this way. Much depends, of course, on the meditative tradition with which one is dealing, but many approaches to meditation will include concentration and/or contemplation as key elements. Many will involve some form of focused, but not ‘forced’, attention on an object or idea or ideal. Most will form part of a wider ethic of care for others and for the world of which they are a part (as well

as care for the self). Seen in this light, Freirean pedagogy is highly compatible with attempts to integrate contemplation or meditation into educational environments (e.g., Dallaire, 2001; Kesson, 2002; Hart, 2004; Altobello, 2007). From a Freirean perspective ‘sitting still’ is necessary for the concentrated, reflective attention required in addressing an object of study. ‘Sitting still’ is also needed in an educational dialogue, where the ability to listen quietly and carefully to others is vital. But ‘sitting still’ is not *sufficient* in bringing the Freirean ideal to life: there is a need also, at times, for considered action and for personal and social change (Freire, 1998c, 2004).

Freire has little to say, directly, about happiness. Happiness, from a Freirean perspective, is not in itself the goal of life. A happy life is not the same as a *good* life. A good life, as far as Freire is concerned, is one lived with love, hope, dialogue, curiosity, tolerance, and political commitment, among other things (cf. Freire, 1972a, 1994, 1996, 1997a, 1998b, 1998c; Escobar *et al.*, 1994). It involves seeking to *know* and to *transform*; it integrates reflection with action (Freire, 1972a). These characteristics have been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (e.g., Roberts, 2000, 2008a, 2008b). Freire does not articulate a conception of ‘the good life’ as an individual ideal. Rather, we must construct a picture of what a good life might mean by considering Freire’s wider ethical, political and educational ideas. It does not make sense, from a Freirean standpoint, to discuss the pursuit of individual ideals without also investigating the social and economic structures, policies and practices that impede or enable the realization of those ideals (Freire, 1972a, 1998b; Mayo, 1999; Roberts, 2000; Morrow & Torres, 2002). A Freirean interest in ‘the good life’ is thus more properly conceived as an inquiry about the conditions (inner and external)

conducive to good *lives*. Freire would want those lives to be ‘happy’ ones, but not if the price to be paid for this is the maintenance of mass ignorance.

Freire might have said, moreover, that unhappiness in the form of distress is a reasonable and desirable quality to cultivate at certain times in a human life, in response, for example, to problems of starvation, exploitation, mass slaughter, the spread of preventable diseases, environmental destruction, and the persecution of animals or children (cf. Freire, 1993, 2004, 2007). Keeping those not affected by such problems free of the burden of knowing about them may grant them more peaceful, comfortable, happier lives, but such an approach, Freire would have argued, cannot be justified from either an ethical or an educational point of view. As the title of one of Freire’s latest books indicates (Freire, 2004), there is value, at times, in developing what might be called ‘a pedagogy of indignation’, where distress and anger, when coupled with love, hope, dialogue, critical reflection, and political commitment, can have a potentially productive role to play in education and wider social life.

The *Tao Te Ching* is helpful in prompting a re-examination of some of our most deeply held views about the role of education. We tend to believe education is fundamentally worthwhile. There is, to be sure, an extensive literature on the harm that can be done by educational institutions. Freire himself was one of the key figures in highlighting the potentially oppressive nature of schooling, as were deschoolers such as Illich (1971) and Reimer (1971). And numerous sociologists of education, including many of a Marxist or feminist persuasion, have demonstrated convincingly that schooling can play a significant role in perpetuating inequities across class, gender and other lines. For the most part, however, this substantial body of critical work does not question the underlying notion that education, understood in a certain way, is ethically desirable.

Education, many theorists have pointed out, must not be equated with ‘schooling’ or ‘training’ or ‘indoctrination’. The idea that ‘education’ implies something worthwhile – an idea articulated and defended most famously, though not unproblematically, by R.S. Peters (1970, 1973) – is taken for granted by many, even if the question of what counts as worthwhile is often subject to vigorous debate. The *Tao Te Ching* challenges this assumption. As Lau (1963) observes:

If the Taoist philosopher could have visited our society, there is no doubt that he would have considered popular education and mass advertising the twin banes of modern life. The one causes the people to fall from their original state of innocent ignorance; the other creates new desires for objects no one would have missed if they had not been invented. (p. xxxi)

The aim of the sage, Lau says, ‘is to keep the people in a childlike state where there is no knowledge and so no desire beyond the immediate objects of the senses’ (p. xxxii).

It is instructive to contemplate not only whether the Taoist position can be justified (from an ethical point of view), but whether it is *possible*. For to interact with others and the world in almost any way is to establish the potential for learning and the development of knowledge. Unless there is a deliberate attempt to maintain ‘innocent ignorance’ via, say, drugs or a sophisticated and sustained process of indoctrination, it is difficult to imagine how a ruler might keep adults in a childlike state. To grow into and through adulthood involves some form of change, not merely in the physical sense but intellectually and emotionally. To attempt to educate, whether through formal institutions (such as schools) or informally (e.g., by ‘learning on the job’ or the passing on of traditional lore and custom), is merely to build in a



more systematic way on what would already be occurring through the activities of everyday life.

Chapter 48 of the *Tao Te Ching* suggests that '[t]o pursue (*wei*) learning one increases daily', whereas '[t]o pursue ... Tao one decreases daily' (Chen, 1989, p. 168). Moving closer to the Tao, according to Chen, involves progressively dropping our human projects, decreasing our stock of human knowledge, until there is nothing for us to do (p. 170). From a Freirean point of view, this is neither desirable nor possible. Knowledge grows as human beings interact with the world. Over time, we may 'forget' certain forms of knowledge, and there are limits to what can be known at any given time, but the potential for relearning is always present. Freire would support the notion of seeking spaces within the hustle and bustle of everyday activity for calm, peaceful reflection, but not with a goal of curtailing the development of knowledge and learning or of reaching a point where will have nothing to do. As far as Freire was concerned, there will *always* be something to do. This need not be 'doing' in the sense of moving about in the world, or of talking or writing or listening. But 'doing nothing', while we remain alive as human beings, is impossible (cf. Freire, 1972a, 1972b, 1998b, 2007).

As noted earlier, Freire would also find a political strategy of deliberately cultivating a state of ignorance objectionable from an ethical point of view. The Taoist sage 'empties the minds (*hsin*) of his people, / Fills their bellies, / Weakens their wills' (ch. 3, Chen, 1989, p. 58). Such an approach, Freire would argue, ignores a fundamental feature of our ontology – we are curious, inquiring, *learning* beings (Freire, 1998b) – and dehumanizes both those denied the possibility of seeking knowledge and those responsible for this denial. He would concede that there are always *risks* in fostering educational development and the growth of knowledge, but

this too is a distinguishing feature of human existence (Freire & Shor, 1987). To be human is to be open to the possibility of change. If the Freirean position on the potential value of education is accepted, teachers and others who seek to educate must bear a heavy burden of responsibility, for if they do their jobs well, those with whom they work will change forever (cf. Roberts, 1996b, 2003). There is, as it were, ‘no going back’ in Freirean education. The same would be true, however, for the Taoist sage seeking to maintain a state of ignorance among those ruled. Once a commitment has been made to decreasing knowledge, any deviation from this path risks the possibility that learning will resume again.

## **Conclusion**

In comparing Freirean and Taoist ideas, it is possible to identify both similarities and differences. As Fraser (1997) points out, both Freire and Lao Tzu are against the imposition of one’s will (as a leader, a teacher, or anyone else in a position of authority) on others. There must, from both a Taoist and a Freirean point of view, be considerable trust in the capacity of human beings to lead themselves. Gentleness and humility are valued highly in both the *Tao Te Ching* and Freire’s educational philosophy. In Taoism, as in Freirean thought, there is an acceptance that human beings are, or ought to be, integrated with wider world. For a Taoist, this means reconnecting with ‘nature’, with the natural order of things; for a Freirean, the process of integration also involves seeing ourselves as part of a wider *social* world. In both Freire’s work and the *Tao Te Ching* there is a recognition of the need to center ourselves in the present. Both Freire and Lao Tzu stress the importance of *being* rather than *having*. They believe a materialistic attitude is destructive and want to

encourage us to love the simple things in life. Both thinkers see limits in a concept of knowledge based too heavily on intellectual mastery. Finally, both Freire and Lao Tzu are concerned with transformation, even if they differ in their views of what this entails.

On some fundamental questions of epistemology, ethics and education, however, key differences emerge. The *Tao Te Ching* advocates the cultivation of a state of ignorance; Freire stands opposed to this. Lao Tzu wants to inhibit the development of knowledge and learning; Freire, while recognizing that not all forms of learning are worthwhile, sees the potential for educational initiatives to play an important role in the wider process of liberation. A Taoist is concerned that education will lead to the creation of new desires and to unhappiness; a Freirean accepts a certain restlessness as part of a good human life and does not see happiness as the ultimate ethical end to which we should strive. Education, for a Freirean, is meant to 'trouble' us; the Taoist, by contrast, wants to encourage people to accept things as they are and education is not always conducive to this. While Taoists in the later 'warring states' period believed 'political involvement and longevity were inherently incompatible' and urged the separation of the sage from the rest of the world, the *Tao Te Ching* sees a role for the sage in the process of government (Wong, 1997, p. 27). In the *Tao Te Ching*, the sage 'minimized his desires, lived simply, and attained longevity, while functioning as the head of the state' (p. 27). The *Tao Te Ching* promotes neither complete non-involvement nor total passivity. Nonetheless, Taoism, even as represented by the *Tao Te Ching*, suggests a more passive ethical and political philosophy than is evident in Freire's work. Non-action may also be action, as discussed above, but in Freirean theory there is greater emphasis on active social change.

The differences between Taoist and Freirean thought need not be regarded as insurmountable barriers to further inquiry and productive dialogue. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely because there are such clear contrasts on some key points that much of value can come from such comparisons. Putting such apparently different bodies of work into conversation with each other can foster deep reflection on the ontological, epistemological and ethical assumptions that underpin our efforts as educators. More than this, Taoism allows us to contemplate the very idea of *wanting* to educate. For many in the educational world, this is akin to examining afresh our very reason for being. That process is worth undertaking, despite the risks such an enterprise holds. Freire provides some answers for those who seek to consider how and why education might be worthwhile but he should not read on his own. Taoists, together with thinkers from a wide variety of other scholarly, religious and cultural traditions, have much to contribute to the ongoing discussion of Freire's work.

## **Acknowledgements**

An earlier version of this paper appeared as a chapter in Roberts, P. (2010) *Paulo Freire in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Education, Dialogue, and Transformation* (Boulder, CO, and London, UK, Paradigm Publishers). Material is reproduced here with the permission of Paradigm Publishers. I also wish to acknowledge two anonymous referees and participants at the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia conference in 2009 for their helpful comments.

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<sup>1</sup> Freire's work lends itself well to critical comparative analysis. Over the years, Freirean ideas have been compared with those of a range of other thinkers, including Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Hegel, Marx, Dostoevsky, Gandhi, Hesse, Dewey, Gramsci, Milani, Habermas, Buber, and Illich. For further comments on the nature and value of a comparative methodology in exploring and evaluating Freire's theory and practice, see Roberts (2010). For further investigation of East-West connections, but from a different perspective, see Bhattacharya (2010). I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees for drawing this last reference to my attention.

<sup>2</sup> As one of the anonymous referees has noted, Freire's understanding of the unconscious warrants an essay in its own right.